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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses several demographic, economic, and technological trends with implications for rural education and dropout rates in the coming decades. As the American population ages, the focus of public policy will shift from youth services to health, safety, and environmental issues. This shift is likely to result in lower levels of funding for public education, and in environmental regulations that may depress certain rural economies. In addition, a national trend toward reductions in agricultural, mining, resource-related, and manufacturing jobs will have disproportionate effects on rural areas where such jobs are concentrated. Some rural areas will be able to offset job losses because of proximity to a metropolitan area with a growing number of service jobs. Other rural areas can anticipate a continuation of higher poverty and unemployment in rural than nonrural areas, a trend suggesting greater family instability in affected rural areas. On the other hand, technology holds promise as a base for the diversification of rural economies and as a means for expanding instruction in small rural schools. A model posits that the dropout decision is highly dependent on the student's academic and social integration. Future trends could influence rural student integration: negatively, through larger classes, larger schools, less opportunities for extracurricular participation, and unstable home environment; or positively, by stimulating student interest through new technologies. (SV)

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The 21st Century and Secondary School At-Risk Students: What's Ahead for Teachers in Rural America?

All of us, at times, dream about what the future holds for us, our loved ones, and the world in general. As educators, we inwardly smile at the post-secondary future for some of our students. For our at-risk students, our optimism is merely a glimmer within a larger picture of uneasiness. The present is not a very amiable place for at-risk students, and the future may be more of the same; but what about teachers and the teaching environment? What does the future hold in store for us, the educators who are charged with caring for the at-risk student? Does it contain a lessened demand for our services due to smaller numbers of students, more effective methods, expanded resources, or none of these? The purpose of this paper is to consider these possibilities within the larger context of what the future may contain for the teachers of at-risk students in the first part of the 21st century.

This theme was explored by first considering the major trends which are likely to impact rural America, our lifestyle, and the manner in which we educate our young. From among the trends which have been identified by futurists as likely to influence our lives, three were selected based upon the diversity and interrelatedness represented, and the impact on education which would be produced. These were (1) the general aging of America's population (Hamrick, 1991), (2) general economic conditions (Hamrick, 1991; Deavers, 1991), and (3) technology (Coates, Jarratt, & Ragunas, 1992). Using these as a beginning point for a consideration of the future, the next step was to identify the areas which would be influenced most, what changes these would portend, and how rural education would be affected. The areas which were felt to be the best candidates for being affected to the greatest extent and in turn influencing rural education were political emphases, legislation, the rural economy, and educational approaches.

Consider for a moment how the aging, economic, and technological trends may materialize as major influences within each of these spheres.

Political Influences: Politically the graying of the population is likely to influence American education by shifting emphases. Given the size of the older cohort of voters, prominent issues are likely to be more health and safety related and less oriented toward youth services. This has

RC 019176

ramifications in government expenditures. It is easy to imagine a scenario in which a smaller percentage of public funds is spent on public education. A corollary of this reduced funding trend is the expectation that schools do more with fewer financial resources and the press for schools to justify the money which is appropriated. With world economic domination a historical afterthought, competition for the available public funds will be much greater, and the voice of education is not as loud in an aging population as in a younger one. Therefore, in relative terms we can expect to have fewer funds available. Program spending for at-risk students may increase as a percentage of the total education expenditures, but that increase is likely to be achieved by subtraction from within other school budget items as opposed to having additional resources appropriated. The economy and technology are likely to influence political emphases relevant to education only to the extent that each contributes to the level of funding available to finance government and governmental programs.

Legal Influences: What legal emphases important to rural life can be expected to result from the graying of the population? A widespread concern for health and health issues is likely to be a prominent feature of the country's population in the future. One outcome of this could be the increase in the number of laws regulating environmental conditions. Some of these, such as industrial emission control, can be expected to have more impact in metropolitan areas, but others which involve agricultural products, mining, and timberlands are likely to influence rural areas more through impacting the economic climate. Some of this impact is likely to be positive, such as promoting increased recreational usages, but others will tend to depress regional economies which are heavily dependent upon agriculture and resource extraction. The net result is that rural communities which can capitalize upon the increased demand for recreational opportunities will be able to offset lost revenues from more traditional rural "industries" and thus more money will ultimately be available for educational expenditures. Technology and general economic conditions are not seen as promoting laws which will influence the manner in which education in rural America takes place.

Economic Influences: In considering the economic trends which are likely to be the major influences of the next 25 years for rural America, it is helpful to view rural areas differentially. This distinction with respect to economic impact can be made of the basis of proximity to a metropolitan area and the concentration of poor in the area. These two

conditions will likely temper and channel economic influences within rural areas.

The general trend in the national economic structure is a reduction in the number of agricultural, mining, resource related, and manufacturing jobs; a corresponding increase is projected in service related areas (Hamrick, 1991). This shift in the national economic base is bad news for rural America since the projected job losses are concentrated in industries which are found more often in rural areas. To capitalize upon the increase in jobs in the "high profile" service sector necessitates proximity to a metropolitan area (Deavers, 1991). Thus rural areas which surround metropolitan ones have a good chance to offset job losses in the more traditional rural job markets and to flourish in the economic times ahead. Other rural areas can anticipate a continuation of a 20th century trend of higher levels of poverty, higher unemployment, and lower earnings than nonrural areas (Deavers, 1991), unless there are dramatic shifts in the economic base of rural communities. Given the link between economic conditions and the incidence of family instability (Abrahamse, Morrison, & Waite, 1988; Moore, Peterson, & Zill, 1985), the future incidence of family instability may get worse in rural areas characterized by poor economic conditions.

The concentration of poor in a rural area has ramifications on two different economic fronts. The first of these is that it probably indicates that the general economic and job bases for the community or region are not thriving. While this could be a temporary condition, it may reflect past and more importantly future conditions. Secondly, having a high concentration of rural poor likely would signify that the general tax base of the community is low and therefore, there will be less money available for educational expenditures in a situation where there may be the need for more educational services.

Technology in general, and telecommunications more specifically, holds great promise for serving as a base in the diversification of rural economies (Coates, Jarratt, & Ragunas, 1992). Telecommunications eliminate the necessity of being close to a metropolitan area in order to have access to a critical mass of potential clients or customers. Service industries built upon the capabilities of telecommunications can be located in rural areas as easily as in nonrural ones. For individuals who prefer a rural lifestyle, telecommunication service industries offer the possibility of living in a rural area while engaging in a career which focuses upon servicing businesses within a metropolitan area. Jobs created around the telecommunication hub would clearly make more money

available for education and would make inroads into the unemployment and poverty conditions of rural America. If the jobs created required advanced skill levels, then one could anticipate a corresponding increase in the educational attainment within the community.

Educational Influences: The aging of the population and general economic conditions are likely to be felt most in education through the amount of money which is made available to support the schools. As was previously stated, there is the potential that both the older population and the general economy will produce pressures which will result in there being relatively less money for schools. This may stimulate a change in the structure of secondary education. With the increased competition for public money, consolidation of services is a possibility. One that appears to be practical would be the merging of some high school and community college programs, especially in the trades/industry field. The net result would be a cost effective expansion of the curriculum available to high school students.

The future influence of technology (telecommunications) on the way we are formally educated in rural America may be greater than any other element mentioned. It possesses the potential to expand instruction and the curriculum of small, rural schools within the constraints of shrinking budgets. Architectural drawing does not need to remain the province of students who attend larger high schools. In like manner, rural teachers do not need to create every piece of instructional material that she/he would like to use. Another positive feature of telecommunications technology is that it is certain to become cheaper and more prevalent, both inside and outside educational settings. This condition provides an additional opportunity for the out-of-school environment to support instruction.

In summarizing the areas in rural education likely to be influenced most by political emphases, legislation, the rural economy, and educational approaches, the following seemed to be the most distinct.

1. A smaller percentage of public money is likely to be available for rural schools due to changing political emphases, laws, and general economic conditions.
2. There is likely to be more emphasis on educational accountability due to changing political emphases.
3. A greater representation of students from families characterized by unstable social and economic conditions may occur within a number of rural classrooms due to general economic conditions.

4. The expansion of the rural school curriculum and the use of more technological oriented teaching approaches are likely as a result of political emphases and general technological development.

Given these potential changes in rural education, what promise or doom do they hold for us, the teachers of students who are at risk of leaving school prior to graduation? In order to get a better idea of how these might influence conditions which would either increase or decrease the likelihood that students would complete school, it is helpful to consider factors which influence the decision to leave school prior to graduating. The dropout decision is a complex one which is influenced by a number of conditions, both inside and outside the school environment. A good overview of these dropout factors, particularly as they have relevance for rural schools, is presented in Bull, Salyer, Montgomery, and Hyle (1992). These factors were inserted into an adaptation of a dropout model for higher education presented in Tinto (1987) and Tinto (1975) in order to conceptualize the dynamics of the decision to leave school prior to graduating. This model is presented in Figure 1.

This model posits that the dropout decision is highly dependent upon the academic and social integration of the at-risk student. The two constructs, in turn, are directly and indirectly influenced by such diverse areas as grades, participation in extracurriculars, and family background. The effect of these ultimately materializes in the decision to drop out or remain in school. For our current considerations, we need to focus upon how the changes in the rural education environment which may be produced by future trends could impact the dropout decision factors.

The first future trend identified was that of relatively less money being available for rural schools. If this manifests itself through larger classes, larger schools, and cutbacks in extracurriculars, one could expect the level of interaction with faculty to suffer and social integration to be less. Under these conditions, the dropout rate would increase. Given that the majority of school budgets is spent on salaries, larger class sizes seem almost guaranteed under conditions where budgets are shrinking. Unless offset through improving other conditions, the larger classes would likely increase the dropout rate. Larger schools are associated with lower student participation rates in activities. This tends to reduce the level of social integration and hence, like larger classes, would foreshadow an increase in the dropout rate. Thus large decreases in the

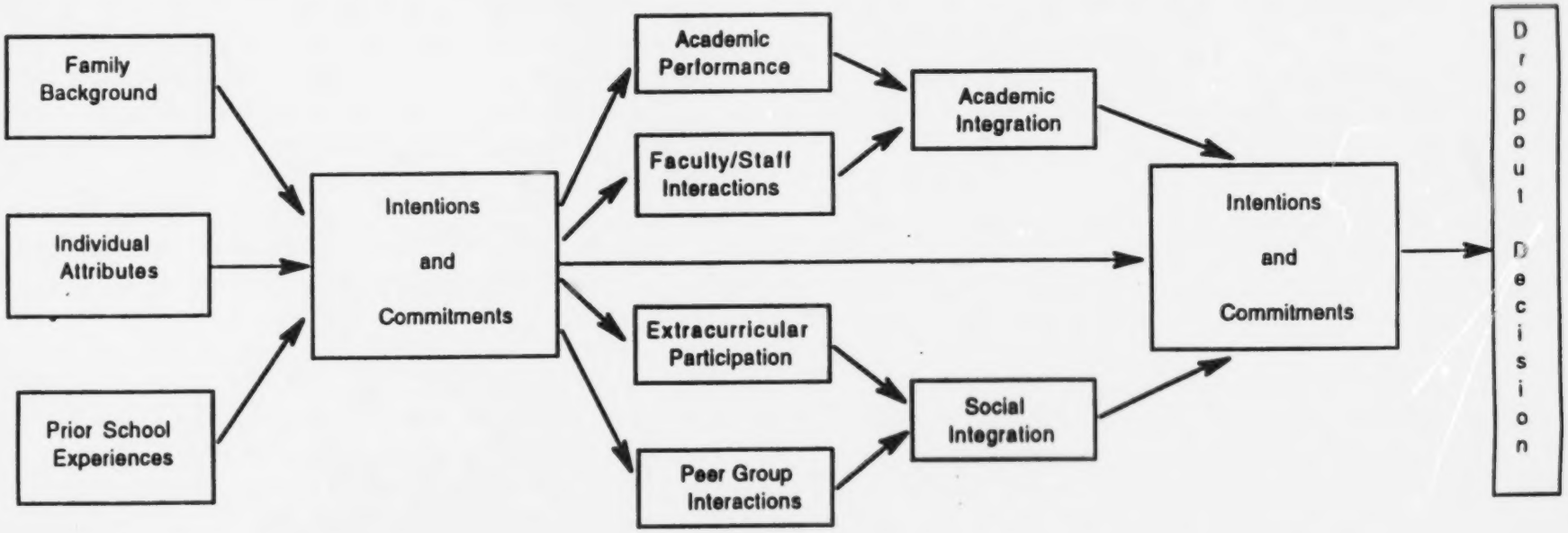

Figure 1. A model of the dropout decision based on Tinto (1975)

relative amount of money appropriated for education on a per student basis would be likely to increase the dropout rate.

A continuation of the movement for increased educational accountability was the second trend identified. Currently, this movement emphasizes higher graduation standards and more focus on core academic subjects. The extension of this into the 21st century would likely reduce the at-risk student's perception that school was a "relevant" place for her/him. On a larger scale this would probably result in an increase in both the number of disenfranchised students and the dropout rate.

A greater proportion of students from unstable home environments was the third area of influence mentioned. The close association among these family characteristics, educational attainment, and economic conditions is likely to generate a large impact on the rural education dropout picture. If the economy within a rural area is quite good, then the problems associated with cutbacks in money for education are alleviated somewhat. Likewise, the negatives associated with unstable family environments would be less. This would have ramifications for practically all aspects of the dropout decision model. With more stable home environments, all factors contributing to social and academic integration would be improved and there would be a smaller probability of students dropping out.

If economic conditions are not good in a rural area and there are high concentrations of rural poor, then family instability is likely to be a widespread condition. The combination of poverty and family instability could be expected to produce a lowered academic orientation, both in terms of interest and in performance. The net result would be less personal identity with the academic mission of the school and less involvement in the social milieu of the school. These conditions likely would produce higher dropout rates.

The expansion of the rural school curriculum and the increased use of more technologically oriented teaching approaches represent the last rural education area identified in the earlier analysis. These are likely to have a positive influence in reducing the dropout rate. An expanded curriculum, particularly in the vocational areas, would be a helpful addition in the education of the at-risk student. Through access to an expanded curriculum, the potential dropout is more likely to find an area of interest. This would stimulate a higher level of academic integration and would reduce the chances of dropping out.

Incorporating instructional approaches utilizing telecommunication technology may not have much impact on the dropout decision. The high quality associated with it is likely to promote interest, and the variety

available will capitalize upon the unique interests of each student. The down side of heavy reliance upon its use is that it removes the student from contact with teachers. The reduced contact would tend to lower academic integration and elevate dropout rates. It is felt that the improved interest benefits derived from the additional use of technology will outweigh any reduced contact with teachers, so that overall, technology should help in reducing dropout rates.

In looking at these four areas, it seems as though our ability to address the education of at-risk students will improve in certain areas and not be as good in others. There are likely to be great improvements in some rural communities and declines in others. The key to whether the at-risk student problem becomes better or worse within a particular rural community appears to be the state of the local economy and the number of rural poor who reside in the community. These clearly are outside the "sphere of influence" of rural teachers.

What are our options as educators in leading the education of at-risk students? The following are offered as our principles for both tomorrow and today.

1. We can try to create a personal relationship with these students.
2. We can try to capitalize on the interests of the students.
3. We can try to create an environment which supports the academic efforts of at-risk students.
4. We can try to incorporate parents into the educational process as much as possible.

Together our efforts in these areas will not improve local economies nor alter political emphases, but they can balance out some of the things over which we have no control.

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